

# *Youth have a striking message: 'We can't be ignored any longer'; As they join worldwide climate protest, young Canadians are seeking new ways to amplify their political voice*

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## **Body**

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It began with one teenage girl skipping school on a Friday to push her government to do something about climate change.

Thirteen months after Greta Thunberg sat outside the Swedish Parliament, that small act of protest has erupted into the biggest climate demonstration in history and inspired a generation of young people to fight for a healthy planet.

Friday's global climate strike saw more than a million people flood the streets in more than 150 countries around the world, including 250,000 in New York City, where Thunberg addressed cheering crowds and demanded global leaders act on the climate crisis.

"It felt like history in the making; it we felt like we were setting the tone for what the future holds," said Caroline Merner, a 24-year-old climate activist from Vancouver who was among those marching in Manhattan. "The momentum young people have is incredible."

In Canada, young activists will build on that energy during a week of climate action that will culminate on Friday in a series of youth-led strikes across the country.

More than 100 events are planned that day, including rallies in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, where Thunberg will be in attendance.

Canadian youth say their voices are a vital addition to global calls for bold climate policies.

Many have already witnessed the effects of climate change - Canada is warming faster than the world average, and the Arctic three times as fast.

They've also watched politicians either fail on their promises to curb carbon emissions or try to reverse existing climate policies, including Ontario's Progressive Conservative government fighting the federal carbon pricing strategy.

And they've taken to heart the stark report issued by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that warns the world has a 10- to 12-year window in which to make deep cuts in emissions to keep the world from warming by 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Staying below that threshold will limit the most dangerous consequences of climate change, including floods, droughts, extreme heat waves and rising sea levels, scientists say.

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Youth say it's time for their voices to be prioritized by all levels of government, and especially in Ottawa. They see the Oct. 21 federal election - and the weeks leading up to the vote - as a particularly important time to make their voices heard.

"We can't be ignored any longer," said Asha Mior, a 17-year-old Vancouver high school student and climate activist. "We are standing up now because we are afraid that people are forgetting we are the future of this planet."

Mior became an environmentalist in Grade 5 after research for a science project alerted her to the perils of a warming planet. Though she was only nine, Mior started an environmental club at her school.

Soon, Mior was blogging about environmental issues and, more recently, using social media to unite people behind climate action. In March, she joined Sustainabiliteens, a youth group from Metro Vancouver that's among those joining the Sept. 27 strike.

Mior balances her school work with youth activism, which she calls a full-time job. She makes phone calls in between classes, answers emails on the bus and sometimes skips school to join her peers in "Fridays for Future" climate strikes.

"Environmentalism is the most important issue of our time and we need to attack it with the scale and urgency that is required," she said, pointing to the IPCC report and its stark warnings. "I know I don't have time to grow up and fix this."

Like many thousands of Canadian teens engaged in the climate movement, Mior is frustrated she can't vote in the upcoming federal election. Mior will turn 18 in February 2020.

"The ways in which we can make change are limited," she said. "We're showing that we are doing the very best that we can, but we can't vote. We have to leave that to the adults."

The David Suzuki Foundation wants adults to think of Mior and other teens and children on election day.

That's why the Vancouver-based environmental organization in August launched its "18 to 8" campaign, a tongue-in-cheek initiative pushing for children as young as eight to have the vote.

Brendan Glauser, the foundation's associate communications director, says that while the campaign is not a real request - it's meant to be a provocative way to generate climate conversations - the motivation behind it is serious.

"The underlying joke is that eight-year-olds would perhaps vote with more wisdom when it comes to prioritizing climate change," he said. "We are trying to elevate their voices ... and amplify their message that urgent action is needed on the global climate emergency right now, this fall, this decade. There is no more time to waste."

Some Canadian teens are actively campaigning to lower the country's voting age.

Haleluya Hailu, a Vancouver high school student, is part of a small but active group called Vote16BC that wants the voting age lowered by two years. She points out that while a single term in government seems like a blip to most adults, those four years - and the decisions made during that time - will have profound impacts on her job prospects, her future finances and how and when she starts a family. Never mind the potentially dangerous consequences of a warming climate.

"All of those things, it's something we (teens) should be voting on," she said, adding that most 16-year-olds have a deep understanding of how their vote would affect other people. "I just really wish this movement (to lower the voting age) was more active before the climate crisis."

The NDP has committed to lowering the voting age to 16 should the party win the October election.

But for Cricket Cheng and other climate youth activists, lowering the voting age is not an immediate priority.

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The 21-year-old University of Toronto undergraduate student and organizer with Climate Justice Toronto says most young people are laser-focused on mobilizing young voters this fall.

"People under 35, we are on the generational front line of the climate crisis," he said. "We are also the largest voting bloc and we have the power to swing the direction of this election."

Cheng says that although Climate Justice Toronto is just months old, the volunteer organization sees about 20 new people at every planning meeting, a sign that young people want bold and rapid change, from policies to curb carbon emissions to strategies dealing with health and social inequities stemming from climate change.

"We've seen such an insatiable appetite among young people to be a part of climate action," he said. "It's been an intense and exciting time to be organizing and mobilizing young people and we are going to keep up this momentum up to the election and beyond as well."

At 28, George Benson is almost aging out of the youth activist label. The Vancouver-based planner and environmentalist says he is inspired by the teens and their historic, youth-led climate movement spearheaded by 16-year-old Thunberg.

But Benson says his years in the workforce have also shown him how many high hurdles may slow the rapid and drastic societal shifts needed to halt a warming planet.

"It's not just that we are failing on our commitments to the Paris Agreement - we can't stop city councils from subsidizing cars. It's all these small decisions that are being made every day ... that weigh so heavily on us who have grown up with the climate crisis."

So big is "the crushing weight of disappointment" in how the world's leaders have handled the climate crisis, Benson says that some young people are debating whether to have children or to save for retirement.

"They say: 'Who needs an RSP? What's the point?'"

Despite the angst about their personal future, Benson says there are no signs the youth climate movement will slow down.

Marina Melanidis, a 24-year-old climate activist from Vancouver, agrees that now is the time, when the world has their attention, to hold governments accountable on climate action.

As project lead for Youth4Nature, an international group that advocates for nature-based climate solutions, Melanidis was among a select number of young people to speak at Saturday's first-ever United Nations Youth Climate Summit in New York.

She called it a historic moment, saying it was "the first time this many young people have been invited into the United Nations headquarters - ever." The Youth Climate Summit is meant to showcase the efforts of young people working to curb global warming ahead of Monday's UN summit on climate change.

In her Saturday summit speech, which quickly become a viral online video netting 25,000 views in three hours, Melanidis told governments that youth must be "co-designers" of climate solutions. "You cannot do this without us," she said.

"This is our future that we are talking about," Melanidis told the Star from New York. "It's our future that's at stake and we deserve to have a meaningful role in designing it."

## Classification

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